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SPECIAL EDUCATION IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD: NEW POSSIBILITIES, NEW CHALLENGES

September 7, 2012 by JoLynne Lyon



Much of what happens in the classroom can't be measured in academic terms.

Over the summer, the CPD's Center for Technical Assistance for Excellence in Special Education organized training events for more than 2,300 special educators and administrators in Utah and Kansas.

A growing concern being discussed around the water coolers: Virtual Education.

"There are many legal questions related to virtual education," wrote TAESE director John Copenhaver, "including how the least restrictive environment, the Individualized Education Program team and progress of the plan's goals operate in a virtual setting."

"For the past three years in my last district this was an area of great angst," wrote Norm Ames, who was a school psychologist and special education administrator before coming to TAESE as the Associate Director of the Mountain Plains Regional Resource Center, which is part of TAESE.

"Parents and adult eligible students would call, wanting to withdraw from their current campus-based program and enroll in the virtual academy newly offered by the district. There are also other 'public' programs offered by the state and other districts competing for the full time equivalent funds. We struggled trying to figure out how to treat the situation just from a logistical issue (district transfer?), let alone a free appropriate public education issue. How does a virtual or online program that accepts federal IDEA money provide interventions that lead to growth on an IEP goal, when there is no physical or logistical means to do so?"

To Marty Blair, TAESE's associate director, the issue is about more than academic goals. "Some argue that on-line programs have built in monitoring systems that track student progress," he wrote. "But IEP goals are not just academic. They may include behavioral, communication, social and community integration activities. What about the positive aspects of traditional education where students learn appropriate behavior and skills by observing each other? This "social or observational learning" is not available for students who are physically isolated from other students. Court cases to define the rights, responsibilities and roles of educators in this evolving education setting are few and far between."